

6 October 1975

STAT

## Those Secret Letter Openings

In the view of the ever-vigilant CIA, even Richard Nixon may not have been above suspicion. When he was campaigning for the presidency in 1968, the agency secretly opened a letter that he received from Ray Price, a speechwriter traveling in Moscow; the contents dealt only with Nixon's election prospects. Idaho's Frank Church, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, disclosed last week that the Nixon letter was one of many thousands that were illegally photographed and filed away from 1952 to 1973, when the program was stopped on orders from former CIA Director James Schlesinger, now Secretary of Defense. Even after Nixon became President, he apparently was not aware of the purloined-letter program—an indication of how far the CIA had escaped Executive control.

**The Watch List.** The operation was centered in the U.S. post office at New York's Kennedy Airport, where as many as six CIA agents worked in cooperation with top U.S. postal officials to open, scan and photograph the letters. Anyone whose name was on a "watch list" had his mail opened if it was sent to or came from the Soviet Union. The committee revealed three names on the eclectic list: Biologist Linus Pauling, the left-leaning Nobel laureate; Labor Leader Victor Reuther; and John Steinbeck, the late novelist.

The mail of many people not on the list was also scrutinized. Among them: Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur

Burns, Senator Hubert Humphrey, Senator Edward Kennedy, Congresswoman Bella Abzug, Martin Luther King, his widow Coretta and Jay Rockefeller, a likely Democratic candidate for Governor of West Virginia. Church had a personal quarrel with the CIA because it had opened a letter that he wrote to his mother-in-law in Boise, Idaho, while he was touring Russia in 1971. Also routinely monitored was mail to or from Harvard University and the Ford and Rockefeller foundations.

Nixon's apparent unawareness of the program was disclosed by Tom Huston, 34, reputed author of the 1970 White House plan that proposed illegal break-ins, wiretaps and mail intercepts to counteract radical activity. The plan, he now concedes, was largely irrelevant because the CIA had already adopted many of those practices. "If we had known all these tools were being used and were still not getting results," said Huston, "it might have changed our whole approach." Mainly because of the opposition of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Attorney General John Mitchell, the plan was rejected by Nixon five days after he had approved it. As if nothing had happened, the CIA continued its illegal mail spying.

Huston still defended these practices in the context of the tumultuous 1960s. What had worried him was "revolutionary violence... the lives and property of people who were being subjected to violence, the 20,000 bombings that occurred in one year and the 39 police officers who were killed." The White House was also worried that the violence might be partially directed or funded from abroad. Yet the FBI, in the opinion of the President's men, did not seem to be making a sufficient

effort to establish the connection.

Huston admitted that his—and the CIA's—remedies could have become worse than the disease. "The biggest mistake I made was that I assumed the integrity of the intelligence people would be so great that despite the sweeping nature of their powers, they would be used only in the most narrow and restricted circumstances. I didn't consider that the person using that power would not be [former CIA director] Dick Helms but [convicted Watergate burglar] Howard Hunt." And, he added, "the danger is that you move from the kid with the bomb to the kid with the picket sign to the kid with the bumper sticker, and so on down the line. The risk is that you slip over from a national security purpose to a political purpose. You end up with those people going into the Watergate."

**Vitally Important.** Sounding scarcely different from the most critical Senators, Huston, now an Indianapolis lawyer, said, "It seems to me that these [intelligence] agencies operate in a world of their own. They are not accountable to anyone. The problem is that you must give these agencies enough independence to protect our liberties and yet still hold them accountable to higher authority."

One of the week's witnesses still clung to the notion of unaccountability. James J. Angleton, 57, had been chief of the CIA's counterintelligence until he was pressured to retire last year because of his unyielding cold war stance. From 1955 to 1973, Angleton was in charge



RICHARD NIXON



EDWARD KENNEDY



FRANK CHURCH



JAY ROCKEFELLER



BELLA ABZUG



MARTIN LUTHER KING

Many thousands of pieces of mail illegally photographed and filed away.